



ON DEMOCRACY: A CONVERSATION WITH PIERRE MANENT

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This month, through the kind courtesy of [La Nef magazine](#), we are so very honored to present this discussion with Pierre Manent, the well-known French political philosopher who of course hardly needs an introduction. Suffice to say that he is the author of very many influential books and articles on the condition and direction of modernity.

Here, Professor Manent speaks with Christophe Geffroy, the editor and publisher of [La Nef](#), on the topic of democracy and Tocqueville, for it was Tocqueville who best observed democracy and corollary, equality. Tocqueville figures prominently in several of Professor Manent's books, including, [Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy](#), [An Intellectual History of Liberalism](#), and [Democracy Without Nations](#).

Christophe Geffroy (CG): How can we best summarize Tocqueville's political analysis of democracy? What definition does he give? What is his contribution, his originality?

Pierre Manent (PM): French political thought in the first half of the 19th century is exceptionally rich. The French Revolution had signified an unprecedented break in the history of Europe. The upheaval suffered, the immense task of reconstruction to be accomplished, all this stirred the hearts and sharpened the minds of all parties. However, it was in the liberal school, taken in the broadest sense, that political reflection was most acute and relevant. Its members accepted the new society as a fact—a fact to be understood and organized politically by founding a representative regime.

Three figures successively dominated the field of political reflection: [Benjamin Constant](#), [François Guizot](#), Alexis de Tocqueville. The first is the most explicit and—I would say—the most naively liberal. He wanted above all to defend, as he says, that "part of human existence which, of necessity, remains individual and independent, and which is by right outside any social competence." His liberalism is of opposition. Guizot is, in short, the one who opposes. He looks at things from the point of view of the one who governs; he is concerned first of all with the "means of government," so that the new power, he explains, must know how to discern and draw from the new society.



Pierre Manent. © Benjamin de Diesbach.

And Tocqueville? He perceives, with an acuity that belongs only to him, a new phenomenon that had not escaped his predecessors, but of which he is the first to perceive to what extent it modifies the conditions of human life in all its dimensions. This phenomenon is democracy. An old word, an old notion, an old reality. But now a brand-new reality: Equality, as an idea and as a feeling, and even as a passion, has acquired an unprecedented power over minds and hearts. Once we have understood that this fact is irreversible, we must learn to organize social and political life in such a way as to realize the human vocation in this new social and moral element.

(CG): In what way is Tocqueville a liberal author, who fits into this precise philosophical tradition?

PM: Tocqueville is a liberal. But in his case, the qualifier is not very illuminating. Certainly, he values freedom; he even celebrates it in grandiose terms. Certainly, he accepts the main doctrinal elements of modern liberalism, and first of all what he calls "the just notion of liberty" according to which each man "is born with an equal and imprescriptible right to live independent of his fellow men in all that relates only to himself." But, at the same time, he vigorously denounces the "individualism" which "draws [each one] unceasingly towards himself alone and threatens to enclose him at last entirely in the solitude of his own heart."

We can formulate the tension that runs through his thought and his soul in this way: On the one hand, liberalism is just because it places a principle of justice at the basis of the new society, whereas all previous human orders necessarily rested, in one way or another, on force. But on the other hand, it is imperative for him to combat the most serious tendency of a society founded on these principles, which is to divert the members of the society from the concern for the common good and thus to leave the highest faculties of man lying fallow. In terms of the contemporary French debate, one could say that Tocqueville is frankly liberal, but also more republican than liberal.

(CG): Today, Tocqueville is mostly remembered for his book [*Democracy in America*](#) and less for [*Ancien Régime and the Revolution*](#). What is the contribution of the latter and how can we situate it in relation to the former?

PM: It is a book on the political history of France, very thorough, carefully and admirably written. He prepared and wrote it in the early years of the Second Empire, which was not yet "liberal." Tocqueville's outlook is very dark. The coup d'état of Louis-Napoleon, and the regime that was then installed, humiliated Tocqueville and discouraged him. Was France condemned to fail unceasingly at the doors of political freedom? How is it that after a Revolution that brought down the monarchical State, that even made a clean sweep of the society of old orders, and then, this new society found itself to be like the old one, and even more than the old one, under the hand of a State that was still "vertical," as we would say today?

Tocqueville is very harsh on our Old Regime, but his indictment has little to do with revolutionary diatribes. In some respects, his book is even a "tomb," in the poetic sense of the word, of the Ancien Régime and its "greatness." One can read for example: "It will always be regretted that instead of bending this nobility under the empire of laws, [the Revolution] has cut it down and uprooted it. By doing so, it has taken away from the nation a necessary part of its substance and made a wound to liberty that will never heal." But here is the indictment: "Class division was the crime of the old royalty, and later became its excuse."

By devitalizing the old institutions that ensured the collaboration of the classes without replacing them with the institutions of political liberty, the monarchy locked everyone into their own condition, thus nourishing the individualism that was the condition of the Revolution and was found, even more virulent, among its major consequences.

CG: For Tocqueville, was the French Revolution part of a movement towards democracy? And what links are there between the revolutionary spirit and the democratic spirit?

PM: This is an essential point. Tocqueville is especially concerned to distinguish the two, which the French are inclined to confuse because of their historical experience: Democracy came for them with the Revolution. This confusion is particularly harmful in France because democrats believe they are obliged to be revolutionaries and anti-revolutionaries to be against democracy. Thus, good citizens who should share the same affection for a regime that knows how to combine equality and liberty become irreconcilable political adversaries.

To show that the democratic spirit is essentially distinct from the revolutionary spirit is one of Tocqueville's principal objects. American democracy provides him with the crucial experience that proves the thesis: The Americans live under an entirely democratic regime—if we except, of course, the institution of slavery in certain southern states—and they know a social and political life that is clearly better regulated than the French. This is because they were "born equal instead of becoming equal." By a cruel irony that would not, I believe, have surprised Tocqueville too much, the American Democrats of today are inclined to reverse his thesis, and to see in slavery not the anomaly, but the ineradicable root of the American regime.

CG: Why was Tocqueville long forgotten in France, which was not the case in the United States, only to be rediscovered fairly recently and to have become an "indispensable" thinker of any analysis of democracy?

PM: It is undoubtedly because the social and political movement has led the French in the direction from which Tocqueville wished to turn them away. On the one hand, the revolutionary spirit found new motives in the extension of industry, which, in the eyes of socialists, especially Marxists, made a new and more radical revolution inevitable. On the other hand, opposition to democracy became independent of nostalgia for the Old Regime, and found in the new France a powerful resource in the form of nationalism.

One fact strikes me—after 1848, and more and more as we approached the new century, the generous and finely discriminating intelligence that characterized the political thought of the first nineteenth century gave way more and more to a fierce polemic that granted nothing to the adversary. Socialists and nationalists competed, if I may say so, in certainty and implacability. There are always great minds,

or at least great talents, but imaginations are narrowed and hearts often shriveled.

Tocqueville returned to the public debate in France, first thanks to Raymond Aron who placed him in the history of social sciences, as one of the great interpreters of modern society alongside Marx, Comte or Weber. Then his star shone at the same time as that of Marx waned—the experience of communist totalitarianism made the idea of the despotic potentialities of equality strikingly relevant.

CG: Our democracies are in crisis, as the record abstention of the last elections confirms. Is Tocqueville a help in understanding this crisis and getting out of it?

PM: The current crisis brings to a climax the tendencies described by Tocqueville. As I said, democracy, as he understands it, is not so much a political regime as a spiritual regime; it is based on an extraordinarily powerful and pervasive affect, namely, the "passion for equality," combined with the "feeling of similarity." It is not only proclaimed that all citizens are equal before the law, or that a judge does not take into account the class, the race or the education of the accused when he judges. One wants to remove any mark of inequality or simply of difference in the social body.

The feeling of the similar, the compassion for the "suffering other," are not only a constitutive part of the feelings of the social man, they form the very atmosphere of the collective life; they give it the tone; they are ordered by the social authority and more and more by the law of politics itself. This social religion certainly has its orthodoxy and its heretics—who would dare contest that men are equal and similar, if not perverse minds, or hearts closed to all humanity?

The consequence of this empire of the similar is that all the differences, natural or acquired, which structure human life—differences of the sexes, of generations, of the contents of life, of the forms of life, of human virtues and vices—all these differences which give human life its form and its meaning, its taste too—well, social religion commands us to refuse to take them into account in our words or our actions, and first of all forbids us to even see them.

Indeed, the real life, ordered by a complex mixture of equality and inequality, of resemblance and difference, is so to speak overlaid by an unreal but obligatory life, where the law commands that we ignore the difference of the sexes, erases the mention of the father, and continuously reforms the language so that this one cannot designate another subject of attribution of what it is to be human in

general. They even want to erase the difference between the human species and the animal species. Thus, the democratic religion commands us to live in a humanity without anything human of its own, without form or order, without any other task than to erase any trace of form or order, and finally any trace of meaning.

CG: The pandemic and the often liberticidal measures taken to contain it have shown that our fellow citizens are more attached to their well-being than to their freedom. Is this in line with Tocqueville's analysis of the nature of democracy?

PM: Compassion is primarily concerned with physical suffering. It is the "pity" of which Rousseau speaks, in which the "animal spectator" identifies with the "suffering animal." In the absence of a moral education, we limit ourselves to "feeling with" the "sensitive" animal. Together with the progress of medicine, the feeling of the fellow man and compassion have encouraged the construction of these extraordinary "health systems" which are one of the most admirable achievements of modern civilization. Let's not kid ourselves—we all want to be well cared for!

But the more collective resources and attention are focused on a particular area, the more unbalanced our common life is likely to be. If we only know how to see suffering bodies, and if the only commandment that makes sense to us is to remove or alleviate physical suffering, then we are handing over not only our bodies but our souls to the machinery of prevention and cure. If our societies have become so organized around the concern for health, it is first of all of course that this concern is universally shared, but it is also because other human concerns have withered away. The desire to control everything, which is natural to governments, finds a docile subject among members of society whose imagination and ambition are increasingly narrowed, and who no longer know how to attach themselves to something greater than their "naked lives."

CG: What role does Tocqueville see for religion in the balance and viability of a democratic society? Does the decline of Christianity in the West threaten democratic vitality?

PM: In a humanity sucked in by the vortex of sameness, transcendent religion, and primarily the Christian religion, introduces difference par excellence. One can think that, at the beginning, it is the desire to bring the transcendent back to us, to domesticate the Most High, that has engaged us in the movement of democratization and homogenization that is reaching its extreme phase today in the West.

If this is the case, the vital prognosis of our civilization is threatened, because how can we revive the concern for transcendence when we are caught in a social and moral movement motivated by the refusal of transcendence? In fact, Christianity itself is today profoundly affected, if not transformed by this rejection. Current Christian preaching tends to be confused with the religion of human likeness. There is a reluctance to take seriously the object of faith. Christianity is deliberately confused with "other religions."

CG: Do we find in Tocqueville a link between nation and democracy? In other words, for him, can democracy be envisaged anywhere, on any scale and independently of a specific history anchored in a culture and a religion?

PM: Tocqueville's analyses presuppose the national framework; he speaks of "European nations" or "democratic nations," but he does not thematize the question of the nation. Tocqueville elaborated his thought before the national question became central to European life. His general approach can, however, enlighten us.

As the progress of democratic equality made European societies more similar, they experienced more keenly their national character, which came to the fore both in their mutual relations and in the relationship of each nation to itself. The internal homogenization was, so to speak, counterbalanced by the ever-increasing value placed on national specificity.

While the different nations were coming closer together in their social form and seemed to be moving towards the same future, each one turned with predilection to its original past. National history became constitutive of the self-consciousness of each to a degree that Europe had never known. The institutions that were directly linked to the national past, the pre-democratic institutions, such as the army or the Church, were able to acquire an unprecedented prestige or role—that of embodying the nation, and possibly providing a point of reference for the rejection of democracy.

Modern democracy has developed within the national framework, and in this sense democracy and national form are closely related. On the other hand, in the nationalist impulse, the nation appears as the synthesis and protector of all those differences that democracy tends to erase, at the risk that these differences serve above all as fuel and pretext for anti-democratic passion.

Today, in North America and in Europe, the democratic movement wants to "do away" with the nation that has nourished and protected it for so long. That is why it is turning with particular aggression against national histories. While an imaginary similarity is imposed on all elements of present life, the past becomes that reserve of differences from which our memory and imagination must be purged.

The nation as it developed in Europe combined the past, the present and the future; it synthesized the three dimensions of time in a way that no political form had been able to do before. Today, the passion for similarity and indistinction between men has reached such a degree of virulence that the present devours both the past and the future: The past because it was so different; the future because it might be very different.

The *featured image* shows a portrait of Alexis de Tocqueville by Théodore Chassériau, painted in 1850.

